

REFLECTIONS ON THE ETHIOPIA-ERITREA BORDER CONFLICT

Gilbert M. Khadiagala

What can we do when such an insane war is imposed on us? It is Eritrea that imposed this war on Ethiopia by committing aggression and occupying Ethiopian territory.

—*Ethiopian Foreign Minister Seyoum Mesfin*¹

The Eritrean government does not see any rationale to this conflict. The border problem can only be resolved through technical demarcation and, if need be, by arbitration on the basis of established colonial treaties.

—*Eritrean Foreign Ministry Statement*²

THE CONTEXT

A border dispute between Ethiopia and Eritrea began in May 1998, startling observers who had celebrated the latter's painless emergence as a new independent state. More confounding was the initial contested terrain, the Yirga Triangle, a piece of desert, which covers 150 square miles along the common border. The dispute has spawned military mobilization, ruptured economic ties and endangered efforts by the Intergovernmental Organization on Development (IGAD), a multilateral organization of states in the Horn of Africa, to promote economic integration and restore a degree of stability to the volatile Horn region. As a war among former allies who had battled dictatorship and oppression, the conflict has destroyed the budding myth about new and visionary African ex-guerrilla leaders transforming Africa's postcolonial landscape. Equally in tatters is the role the two countries played in U.S.-sponsored containment of Islamic fundamentalism in neighboring Sudan. Since the start of the conflict, international mediators have scurried between Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and Asmara, Eritrea, without much success. What began as a battle over Badme, the provincial town in the Yirga Triangle, has become a tragedy.

This article reflects on the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict in the context of the overarching question of borders in Africa. Borders and boundaries are tan-

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gible symbols of the external reach of statehood in postcolonial states struggling for identity and affirmation. As mechanisms for determination of the geographic extent of power and authority, boundary conflicts invariably perform nation-building roles, legitimizing the rule of elites and molding the character of new nations. In postcolonial African interstate relations, borders are essentially instruments of political and geographic certainty, furnishing juridical expression to the artifices imposed by European colonizers. In the early 1960s, irredentist claims engendered border contests that forced the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to establish stable rules of interstate relations on territoriality and sovereignty. But these rules did not entirely obliterate irredentism, particularly where fragile regimes mobilized frontier claims and virulent nationalism to bolster domestic authority.³

Over the years, however, border conflicts became less frequent for a number of reasons. First, the norms of the African state system rendered irredentism passé, submerging it in territorial status quo and good neighborliness. Second, since border claims often were tied to personalities, changes in leadership muted most of these claims. Third, border wars conclusively laid some of the claims to rest as the winners asserted their authority over previously disputed areas. Ethiopia's triumph in the border war with Somalia in 1977-1978 over the latter state's territorial ambitions is instructive. Finally, formidable internal challenges to irredentist states deprived them of the rationale and means to pursue their goals. As the case of Somalia demonstrates, civil wars weaken transborder nationalism, as the powerlessness and fragmentation caused by the internecine fighting tones down longstanding territorial objectives.⁴

In contemporary Africa, borders are permeable geographical barriers, which are continually subverted by deepening cosmopolitanism, globalization and the civilizational logic of economic integration. Such integration denudes the attractiveness of frontiers as political and economic objects and denies the salience of sovereignty. By permitting the mobility of factors of production for wealth creation, economic integration restrains border conflicts, enlarging the institutional framework for problem solving. However, in the Ethiopia-Eritrea case, the opportunities for economic integration that would have eased the transition of the border from a provincial to a national boundary have been squandered in a conflict that essentially mirrors elite insecurity and narrow nationalism.

The Ethiopia-Eritrea border conflict should be understood as a postcolonial conflict where weighty questions of political identity and geographic certainty are compounded by the unique transition from a provincial boundary to an international one. In normal circumstances, territorial boundaries require certainty, predictability and a modicum of fixity. In the special circumstance of a history of relatively unimpeded transborder mobility and migration, clarity becomes even more critical. Norms and mechanisms for resolving border conflicts abound in the international arena, but feuding states are less likely to use them when these conflicts are surrogates for underlying nation-building and regime legitimization problems. Given the wealth of formulas for resolving territorial tensions, escalation of the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict makes clear a fundamental failure to construct institutions strong enough to stabilize authority.

A TRANSITION THAT WAS OVERSOLD

Border disputes, Touval concluded in his study of African boundaries, spring from antagonisms that often have no relation to the common border. He suggests that:

The primary conflict between governments may have had a variety of causes: personal antagonism between leaders, competition in the African arena, one government's support of opposition groups against another government and a chain of mutual suspicion and subversion. When such relations lead to border disputes, these disputes are inadvertent by-products, or symptoms, of another conflict. At the same time, boundary claims that arise in this manner may serve as a lever for the exertion of pressure intended to extract concessions in matters unrelated to the boundary.⁵

This observation aptly captures salient features in the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict. The contested border is insignificant, though its conflict cloaks fundamental differences regarding the structure and content of future bilateral relationship. Although starting as a secondary source of the conflict, the border war has complicated the primary political and economic areas of contention, exposing outstanding hostilities and igniting new ones. In turn, a settlement has become much more difficult because the entire relationship has been held hostage by what both sides deride as an "insane war." At heart, the conflict stems from the inevitable transitional pains, largely economic, of geographical and political separation. The recognition of, and move to address, these problems has been inadvertently camouflaged by the broader euphoria of a new democratic order—the inopportune ritualization by powerful external actors of a supposed alliance of moderate African leaders and their geostrategic roles in the Horn of Africa. Overselling the idea of an amicable split that created Eritrea invariably postponed serious reflection on the future institutional arrangements. *The Economist* correctly likened the transition to an "amicable divorce, [that] became *de jure* without a properly drawn-up settlement. The ownership of many things, including long sections of the border, was never agreed."⁶

Eritrea became independent from Ethiopia in May 1993 following a protracted guerrilla war that overthrew the military dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1991. The fall of Mengistu resulted from a close military and political alliance between the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). This alliance contributed to Eritrea's peaceful accession to independence. Under President Issaias Afewerki, the EPLF (now renamed the People's Front for Democracy and Justice) governs in Asmara, while the TPLF, led by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, is the core of the ruling alliance of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government.

In the aftermath of the transition, instead of moving the relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia to a broader institutional framework, the two leaders basked in the glory of the anti-Mengistu alliance, an alliance whose *raison*

d'être began to fade fast in the welter of old issues and new concerns. The camaraderie of the war of liberation concealed historic rivalries between the two parties, whose leaderships and main sources of support came from both sides of the then-provincial border. For example, the EPLF played an important role in the founding of the TPLF in the mid-1970s, providing it with arms, training and personnel. But strains arose from ideological and personality conflicts as the EPLF tried to assert itself over the TPLF.⁷

In the pattern of postcolonial states, Prime Minister Zenawi and President Afeworki came to embody the image of their nations. In stamping their personalities and leadership styles on to otherwise weak national and bilateral institutions; however, they guaranteed that the resurgence of conflicts over identity and stature would have enormous consequences on the stability of the entire relationship. It is in this respect that the border conflict (posed in populist terms as a war among "brothers" and "cousins") exhibits an inability to structure rule in impersonal institutions. Soon after the border hostilities broke out in May 1998, Afeworki suggested that settlement would be illusive because of concerns "about pride, integrity, respect, trust, confidence and all those kinds of things. When you lose them, it becomes a big problem for us in this region—it is not always money or resources."⁸

Since 1993, both states took markedly different approaches to political management and nation-building. To manage ethnic divisions that bedevil Ethiopian politics, Zenawi created ethnic federations that potentially gave each group the right to self-determination. The 1995 constitution that embraced ethnic federation dovetailed with the government's objective of decentralized authority, but most of its opponents have seen it as a ploy by the Tigrayan-based leadership to consolidate effective power at the center. Opposition, particularly from the traditional Amhara elites and disaffected southern Oromos, since 1995 has coalesced in demands for genuine democracy and power sharing. There also has been criticism from "nationalist" groups that regard the Zenawi regime as the most ardent supporter of Eritrean independence given the previous alliance. Armed opposition by the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) to the south and east have posed serious threats to the stability of the government.⁹

In contrast to Ethiopia's experiment with federalism, the Eritrean government has created a unitary state. Informed by the need to rebuild a country devastated by three decades of war, the Eritrean government has closely followed the pattern of postcolonial consolidation with a premium on charismatic leadership governing within the structures of a populist one-party state. Central to the "National Charter for Eritrea," approved in February 1994, is the principle of enhancing nationhood as the foundation for post-war reconstruction. As one observer notes: "All the big decisions on internal policy taken since 1991 ... have been motivated by the concern to make irreversible the internal unity that had been forged during the war of a 'mosaic' country, which is almost as ethnically, religiously, and linguistically different as is neighboring Ethiopia. The only real ideology of the Eritrean regime is an undeviating nationalism."¹⁰

Eritrean nationalism initially focused on creating an efficient state machinery, implementing land reforms and rehabilitating socioeconomic

infrastructures. More recently, it has assumed decidedly regional dimensions, particularly as Eritrea took a leading role as a rear base for the military campaign against the Islamic fundamentalist government of Omar al-Bashir in the Sudan. Endowed with a battle-hardened military and self-confidence, Afeworki seemed ready, in the words of one commentator, to "boost Eritrea's identity at every opportunity."¹¹ As Richard Cornwell further observes, "Eritrea is a pretty feisty little nation. It has certainly pulled itself up by its bootstraps. It fought its war of national liberation from the old Ethiopian empire single-handedly.... It feels it is really responsible for its own situation, and this has led to an elevated sense of its national identity. I suppose one could compare it with Israel, where a very small nation is very assertive."¹²

Economic cooperation and integration between Ethiopia and Eritrea overcame Ethiopia's loss of its ports and coastline. Agreements reached in 1991 and 1993 provided for reciprocal rights of citizens; Eritrea's use of the Ethiopian currency, the Birr; and Ethiopian access to the Red Sea ports of Assab and Massawa. Undergirding these arrangements was economic interdependence, whereby Ethiopia remained the principal supplier to Eritrea of food, revenues related to transshipments through the ports and jobs to nearly 300,000 Eritreans. Yet differences in economic policy surfaced early when Ethiopia claimed that Eritrea expelled 150,000 Ethiopian migrant workers in 1991 and 1992. Patrick Gilkes contends that this action generated severe internal criticisms in Ethiopia: "The government's failure to protest over the expulsions was much resented. There was a general, and largely accurate, belief that there was no real reciprocity over access to employment, and that it was Eritrea and Eritreans who had largely benefited at the expense of Ethiopia."¹³ Additional strains arose from Ethiopian complaints about mounting costs of fuel supplied by the Eritrean refineries at the port of Assab. In particular, Ethiopia decried paying for most of the investment cost for the refinery as well as paying in hard currency for use of Eritrean port services.

The economic frictions culminated in Eritrea's decision to introduce its own national currency, the Nakfa, in November 1997 to solve its shortage of currency reserves. Although the Asmara authorities requested that both the Nakfa and the Birr be legal tender in both countries, Ethiopia rejected this move, and instead, insisted on the use of hard currency in all commercial transactions. The currency conflict caused considerable economic hardships for both states, as the hard currency transactions raised the costs of Eritrean ports for Ethiopians and food supplies for Eritrea.¹⁴ The deteriorating economic relationship heightened the political temperature and ignited the border conflict.

THE SHOOTING BEGINS

Border disputes are routinely managed by bilateral and international institutions such as joint commissions, arbitration committees and the International Court of Justice. In postcolonial Africa, the existence of these institutions does not always prevent the use of force, underscoring the inextricable links between boundary conflicts and the politics of insecure regimes. Elites in search of

respite from mounting internal conflicts often find solace in border wars, invoking images of precolonial imperial grandeur and resurrecting colonial maps to justify territorial demands. In the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict, the political and economic pressures growing out of the haphazard transition converged around the definition and delimitation of a boundary that was uniquely colonial and provincial. These centrifugal pressures overwhelmed a joint commission that both states established in 1993 to demarcate the border.

While not explicitly demarcated on the ground, most of the boundary was drawn on the map in a series of agreements between the Italian colonizers of Eritrea and Ethiopia between 1890 and 1941. Subsequent changes in the control over Eritrea compounded the problem by continually altering the status of the boundary.¹⁵ For instance, in 1936 Italy redefined the boundary, but when Eritrea came under British rule through a U.N. mandate in 1941, Britain restored the original Italian-Ethiopian border. During the period of Ethiopian control of Eritrea, provincial governors made additional changes to parts of the boundary. Thus, when it became an international border in 1993, there were guaranteed to be genuine differences over delimitation. Two of the four important disputed areas, the Yirga Triangle and Zalambessa, form part of the Tigray federal region and constituted operational zones for both the EPLF and TPLF during the war. The other two are in the Afar federal region adjacent to the border with Djibouti.¹⁶

Eritrea's conflicts with Ethiopia and other neighbors hinge on definitions of ownership that rely primarily on the original Italian colonial border. In December 1995, Eritrea and Yemen nearly came to the point of fighting over each country's claims to the Hanish and Zugar islands in the Red Sea. This conflict was resolved by international arbitration in Yemen's favor with Eritrea's withdrawal of troops. Similarly, in April 1996, a border confrontation occurred between Eritrea and Djibouti when the former shifted the border to conform to the colonial frontier.

Despite minor skirmishes on the Ethiopia-Eritrea border, the joint commission to demarcate the boundary had proceeded uninterrupted with no particular urgency. The commission had met in Addis Ababa in an ongoing process of consultations shortly before the skirmishes broke out in May 1998. According to one observer, "the two had been haggling over their ill-defined border since Eritrea was given independence from Ethiopia in 1993, but they had done so peacefully, with the customary exchange of niceties one would expect from neighbors."¹⁷

Fighting began May 6 and escalated into a battle by May 12 as Eritrean forces occupied the towns of Badme and Shiraro in the Yirga Triangle. Ethiopia called this an act of territorial aggression and demanded unconditional withdrawal, but Eritrea accused Ethiopia of creeping into its territory and dismantling local authorities by force. Eritrea accused Ethiopia of "unilateral redrawing of the colonial boundary."¹⁸

Immediately thereafter Ethiopian forces retaliated in the Yirga Triangle and at various places along the border. As both sides pursued a massive buildup of force on the border, Eritrea called for international mediation to determine the status of the contested areas. Ethiopian Foreign Minister Seyoum Mesfin,

however, countered that Addis Ababa would only consider negotiations when Eritrean troops withdrew unconditionally: "There is no alternative to the establishment of the status quo ... that prevailed prior to the invasion."¹⁹

In the aftermath of the clashes, the conflict expanded both militarily to embrace the rest of the border and politically into other facets of the bilateral relationship. Ethiopia took the most substantive action by diverting its foreign trade traffic to the port of Djibouti from Eritrean ports, stopping fuel imports from Assab, bringing an end to cross-border trade and reducing the number of Eritrean diplomats in Addis Ababa to three. This predictable spiral of escalation meant that, over a short period of time, the dispute had crossed a dangerous psychological threshold where military logic clouded peaceful entreaties.

The United States and Rwanda intervened in the first few days of the border clashes in a bid to de-escalate the conflict. Describing themselves as "Friends of Eritrea and Ethiopia," the United States and Rwanda initiated mediation conducted by the U.S. assistant secretary of state for African Affairs, Susan Rice, and Rwanda's minister in the presidency, Patrick Mazimhaka. These diplomatic efforts seemed pertinent as the war threatened to destabilize the Horn of Africa and destroy the reputations of allies at the center of the "African renaissance."²⁰ After consultations, the United States and Rwanda proposed a peace plan with four points: 1) the parties agree to resolve the dispute by peaceful means; 2) they reduce current tensions by agreeing to deploy a small observer mission to Badme and oversee the Eritrean force withdrawal to positions held before May 6; 3) they agree to a lasting resolution of the underlying dispute through a swift and binding delimitation and demarcation of the border; and 4) they demilitarize the entire common border as soon as possible. The OAU and IGAD emissaries backed the peace plan, while Italy offered to provide crucial maps to clarify some of the historical questions.²¹

The four-point proposal found more favorable reception in Addis Ababa than Asmara, principally because of the provision of Eritrean withdrawal and the return of Ethiopian administration. In the same breath that Zenawi accepted the peace deal, however, he authorized the Ethiopian defense forces "to take all the steps needed to foil the Eritrean invasion. ... It is now time for the Ethiopian people to take all the necessary steps to protect their country's sovereignty, while continuing to preserve their wish for a peaceful resolution."²² For its part, Eritrea claimed that withdrawal "as a precondition would unlikely win local support. It does not make sense. ... Why should we withdraw from our own territory?"²³ Instead of the U.S.-Rwanda proposals, Eritrea suggested a plan that would involve the recognition and adherence to colonial borders, the demarcation of the boundary by the U.N. Cartographic Unit and the demilitarization of the border with observers acceptable to both sides. Downplaying Ethiopian threats of armed action, Eritrea warned that it would "never acquiesce to the language of force and intimidation and will, if necessary, resolutely defend its hard-won right to live in peace and freedom."²⁴

In early June 1998, Ethiopia used Eritrea's rejection of the U.S.-Rwanda plan to mount retaliatory air raids on military targets on the outskirts of Asmara. In response, Eritrea conducted similar raids on military targets in the provincial

capital of Tigray, causing civilian deaths. The air strikes occurred alongside the reinforcement of ground forces in the other contested border fronts.²⁵ As the air strikes continued, Eritrea claimed that Ethiopia had imposed a virtual blockade of its air space and ports by threatening to attack commercial aircraft and civilian vessels. Afeworki threatened further military strikes if Ethiopia did not lift the air and sea embargo.

The air war and border deployment raised the salient question of military balance in case of all-out war. Ethiopia's population of 60 million outnumbers Eritrea's by 15 to 1, and its army of about 120,000 dwarfs Eritrea's 35,000 men under arms. But most of the latter's regular army is made up of veterans of the 30-year war for independence. In addition, at the start of the May fighting, Eritrea called up 10,000 reservists and sent them to the frontier. While Ethiopia demonstrated air superiority in the June raids on Asmara, both countries have large standing armies that are heavily armed, well-equipped, highly trained and experienced in conventional fighting. Invoking the imagery of David and Goliath, Eritrea has portrayed itself as capable of sustaining a long confrontation with its neighbor.

On June 14, U.S. President Bill Clinton intervened to put pressure on both countries to suspend the air strikes.²⁶ While they agreed to a moratorium on air strikes, they continued to strengthen their ground forces along the 630-mile-long frontier, occasionally interrupting the stalemate with artillery fire, shells, rockets and mortars. With military mobilization replacing the original border skirmishes, there seemed to be less interest in a peaceful settlement. On both sides of the conflict, moderate and conciliatory voices were drowned in the ensuing propaganda and cultural wars that evoked, respectively, the glorious history of empire or the struggle for national liberation. National pride, as Afeworki pointed out, was becoming an impediment to a negotiated settlement.²⁷

The mediators' formula for averting a full-scale war was to define the conflict primarily in technical terms. From this view, the four-point plan was to allow the parties sufficient breathing space to discuss questions of frontier demarcation and delimitation. As the conflict worsened, however, the border issue showed itself not to be the cause, but rather a symptom of political and economic tensions and a dramatic arena for the two parties to demonstrate their capacity to cause trouble and embarrassment for the other. This was exacerbated when the conflict was seen as a "family feud" between Zenawi and Afeworki. The history of the rule of personality in Africa since the 1960s makes clear that, in the absence of countervailing institutions, wars assume idiosyncratic dimensions, fought on emotional stakes. As they are transformed into battles of individual will rather than national contests, protagonists are often unwilling to back down, having invested too much in the conflict. When border wars are fought to conceal domestic weakness and shore up legitimacy, the contestants find it difficult to extricate themselves. Gilkes explains the lukewarm response by both sides toward the peace plan:

A central point of this crisis is that neither Prime Minister Meles Zenawi nor President Issaias Afewerki can afford to be seen to back down. Both are rather weak[er] politically than they have been and both have seen this crisis as a valuable way to tap into national feeling and regain support slipping away because of other factors. Meles has been under heavy pressure even within the TPLF, as well as the in the EPRDF, to prove his Ethiopian credentials. He is seen and he would indeed deny his position as architect and the chief proponent of a strongly pro-Eritrean foreign policy ... similarly, Issaias has been facing a series of problems over the economy and over food shortages, as well as growing criticism of the government's land policy and over such issues as democracy and pluralism, Islam, corruption and the government's continued and strident anti-Sudanese policy.²⁸

Another analyst shows the dilemma facing the two leaders: "At one time their personal friendship would have overcome a relatively trivial border dispute but now they both may be looking to victory to protect themselves."²⁹

AN AFRICAN SOLUTION TO AN AFRICAN PROBLEM? THE OAU MEDIATES

Despite the limits of the four-point plan, the initial intervention by the United States and Rwanda preempted the stampede and congestion of mediators that bedevil most African conflicts. The diverse number of actors the conflict subsequently attracted meant that there was going to be more chaos than coordination, particularly since most of the African intervenors have not had much credibility in mediating conflicts elsewhere. Rather than establishing a credible framework for negotiation, multiple mediators, infused with mixed motives, often stumble upon one another, creating confusion in turn.³⁰ Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi had, for instance, submitted a proposal for sending troops from the Sahelian-Saharan Group to the disputed border area. Meanwhile, IGAD and other emissaries converged around the conflict without a clear sense of purpose.³¹

Yet, the U.S.-Rwanda initiative, premised on saving the new leaders from their own mistakes, helped reward obstinacy, enabled both parties to procrastinate. Moreover, by presenting the problem as one that could be resolved by "friends of the belligerents," the United States and Rwanda helped to personalize the context of conflict resolution. Despite good intentions to reduce tensions, the high profile the United States accorded to a conflict that both parties variously labeled as absurd and reckless served only to encourage the parties to blackmail the region and their own people.³² It is, however, a reflection of the determined efforts to promote and justify the existence of new African leaders that some analysts harped on enlisting the mediation services of other partners in the "African renaissance" even in the face of problems with the U.S.-Rwanda peace plan. For instance, Landsberg prescribes:

South Africa's [Thabo] Mbeki and Uganda's [Yoweri] Museveni should consider getting directly involved in the arbitration efforts with the objective of trying to broker and cement a credible peace pact. The two leaders have personal friendships with both Prime Minister Zenawi and President Afeworki. Giving President Museveni a responsible statesman's role in ending the war is all the more vital because if a settlement proves elusive, the Ugandan president may choose sides and align himself with Ethiopia's Zenawi. Museveni thus could easily become a force-multiplier and part of the problem. The last thing the Horn needs is for other African powers to get embroiled militarily.³³

The compromise between multiple African mediators and the parties' powerful allies was the OAU. Yet, the outbreak of hostilities demonstrated profound weaknesses in the OAU's Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution mechanism, particularly the newly-created Early Warning Center in Addis Ababa. Occurring in the OAU's own backyard, this conflict embarrassed Secretary General Salim Ahmed Salim, who is a strong advocate of indigenous solutions for Africa's problems. To bolster its sagging image, the OAU formally entered the peace process on June 4, at a summit of foreign ministers in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Urging Eritrea and Ethiopia to observe a cease fire and explore avenues for a peaceful resolution of the dispute, Salim told the foreign ministers "to put the entire weight of our continent in support of a peaceful resolution and avoid the widening of the conflict whose catastrophic consequences are self evident."³⁴

The OAU Heads of State Summit on June 10 adopted a resolution appealing to the two parties to accept the proposal made by the United States and Rwanda. Yet, the Ouagadougou meeting revealed the widening gap between the belligerents as the OAU was treated to venomous propaganda. Repeating Ethiopia's desire for restraint and willingness to cooperate with mediators, Foreign Minister Seyoum warned that Eritrea's bid to create facts on the ground before negotiations constituted a dangerous precedent in Africa:

The minimum that members of our Organization should tell the authorities in Eritrea, individually and if necessary collectively, is that it is not right and it is a danger for Africa for African States to invade others and create facts on the ground and then after having created a *fait accompli* to invite the invaded country for talks.³⁵

Eritrea expressed interest in more talks, insisting that it would withdraw from the contested areas within the framework of a general demilitarization of the border. Eritrea also noted that it had rejected the peace proposal because of the "premature announcement of the recommendations before discussions on these outstanding issues were exhausted." The stumbling block to a genuine solution, its delegate argued, was "not differences over general principles or the temporary authority over civilian centers in the demilitarized areas, [but instead] Ethiopia's logic of force and spiral of measures that have begun by

blowing the problem out of proportion and have ended up escalating the conflict to the brink of full-scale war." To restart the talks, Eritrea made three proposals: full demilitarization of the border areas to ensure that hostilities would not recur, direct talks between Eritrea and Ethiopia in the presence of high-level mediators and appointment of high-level African mediators.³⁶

Responding to Eritrea's request, the OAU appointed a team of mediators made up of four leaders from Burkina Faso, Rwanda, Djibouti and Zimbabwe to negotiate the implementation of the peace plan. But the OAU initiative occurred against the backdrop of mutual recriminations stemming from continued mass population expulsions. Human rights groups decried Ethiopia's expulsion of Eritrean professionals and businessmen labeled as "dangers to state security," as well as Eritrea's detention of Ethiopian citizens. At the same time, there was a marked deterioration of the conditions of tens of thousands of people displaced by fighting in the border areas, leading to Ethiopian appeals for international emergency assistance. Furthermore, Eritrea charged that Addis Ababa was reimposing the air and sea blockade in violation of the moratorium on air strikes.³⁷

The OAU mediators shuttled between Asmara and Addis Ababa on June 18 and June 19. But because they were operating within the strictures of the U.S.-Rwanda peace plan, the African team was unable to advance any new ideas without alienating either party. According to an Eritrean official: "The OAU team did not present any new proposals. They said they came to seek our views on how to resolve the conflict. We gave them those views and our proposals on how to find a long-term solution."³⁸ The Ethiopian government said it would agree to a cessation of hostilities and seek a negotiated settlement as soon as Eritrea agreed to withdraw from the disputed territory. The Ethiopians also cautioned against parallel mediation efforts outside the OAU, because as one Ethiopian official remarked, they "would prolong and complicate the process and can only benefit Eritrea."³⁹ Eritrea insisted that the heart of the crisis was Ethiopia's redrawing of the colonial boundary. The most Eritrea could promise was to refrain from further military skirmishes; as Afeworki told the OAU committee, "We don't have any intention of escalating this war. Any battle you would call the mother of battles, the mother of wars, will never happen Let's put our alliance back in place so that we contribute to each other's stability and to the stability of the region."⁴⁰

The OAU's peace initiative broke down on June 19. In the aftermath, the OAU was forced to decide between proceeding on the basis of the U.S.-Rwanda peace plan or renegotiating it. The former option was untenable as it had resulted in a diplomatic stalemate. In renegotiating the plan to make it more palatable to Asmara, the OAU had to hasten its diplomacy to preempt the resumption of hostilities. Equally important, the longer the conflict dragged on, the more likely it would attract new mediators who would invariably outshine the OAU. The Eritrean preference for multiple mediators, borne of Afeworki's dissatisfaction with the OAU, was evident in an interview on the eve of the OAU mission:

The OAU has its limitations and no one can exaggerate its capabilities. There must be a pragmatic approach to solving the conflict, with the OAU acting merely as an umbrella organization for all the mediation efforts. We have always talked about a consolidation of efforts. It is not that some have the influence and capability. We would like to see all efforts combined to bring an effect, and I think the OAU ought to be just one element. The OAU on its own could not come up with miracles and find a solution to the problem.⁴¹

The four OAU nations appointed a fact-finding ambassadorial committee on June 20 that was to work closely with the OAU secretary general to produce a compromise report within a month. On June 26, the U.N. Security Council supported the OAU peace initiative and offered to provide technical assistance in the eventual delimitation and demarcation of the border. On the same day, the Eritrean National Assembly unanimously approved the government's previous position on the border war, including the demand for direct negotiations without conditions. In addition, the assembly placed the "sole responsibility" for the conflict on Ethiopia for violating "Eritrea's sovereignty, invading its territory and pushing for a violent solution by rejecting a peaceful path."⁴²

Even as the OAU frantically reinvigorated the peace process, both sides began to seek new sources of arms after the Clinton administration suspended sales of weapons and war materiel in July. An aggressive buying spree followed, as both sides acquired small rifles, grenades and ammunition, as well as fighter bombers and helicopters from China and the former Eastern bloc nations.⁴³ At the same time, marking a departure from the era of cutbacks in defense spending, the Ethiopian parliament approved a 9 percent increase in the defense budget for fiscal year 1998-1999, for the first time in seven years.⁴⁴

The OAU ambassadorial mission was reduced to three representatives in early July when Rwanda withdrew following Eritrean objections to its involvement. Tainted by its previous role in the U.S.-Rwanda peace plan, the Eritreans perceived Kigali as sympathetic to Ethiopia.⁴⁵ Yet, in almost two months of fact-finding and shuttle diplomacy, the OAU committee could not insulate the peace process from multiple peace brokers as Egypt, Tunisia, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Libya, Italy and Uganda joined the mediation fray. During a meeting with Kenya's President Daniel Arap Moi in mid-July, Zenawi again raised the issue of competing peace initiatives. According to an Ethiopian diplomat in Nairobi: "The prime minister said the multiplicity of initiatives was not helpful. Eritrea was seeking to crowd the mediation effort by bringing in other mediators, notably the Italians, so that the negotiating process would be drawn out, thereby removing the need for its immediate withdrawal from the disputed territory."⁴⁶ In October, former U.S. National Security Advisor Anthony Lake joined the already crowded field of mediators.

The ambassadorial committee presented a draft report that was reviewed by foreign ministers on October 15 in Ouagadougou before it was formally submitted to Eritrean and Ethiopian heads of state. In early November, Afeworki and Zenawi met separately with leaders of Burkina Faso, Djibouti and Zimbabwe to assess the draft proposals. In a nutshell, the OAU proposals did

not substantially differ from the U.S.-Rwanda peace plan, except for ascertaining the status of the Badme-Shiraro area before the onset of the conflict: "With regard to the authority which was administering Badme before May 12, 1998 and on the basis of the information at our disposal, we have reached the conclusion that Badme town and its environs were administered by the Ethiopian authorities before May 12, 1998. This conclusion obviously does not prejudice the final status of that area which will be determined at the end of the delimitation and demarcation process." On the basis of this conclusion, the report recommended that pending U.N. arbitration on ownership, Eritrean forces would withdraw from Badme and its environs, allowing the return of the Ethiopian civilian administration and the deployment of a U.N.-supervised, African peace-keeping force. The OAU also recommended that ultimate sovereign jurisdiction over the contested areas would be exercised by the legitimate authority once the entire border has been demilitarized and demarcated, a process that would be completed in six months. Finally, the plan asked both parties to address the negative socioeconomic impact of the crisis on the civilian population, particularly the displaced and deported people.⁴⁷

At the mid-December meeting in Ouagadougou of the 16-nation summit of the OAU Central Organ for Conflict Resolution, Ethiopia, again, accepted the recommendations stating that they met its primary concerns. In his submission to the OAU summit, Afeworki requested amendments to the core proposals requiring withdrawal from the disputed areas. The summit, however, rejected this request and adopted the OAU Peace Proposal Framework Agreement as the basis for a settlement. Subsequently, the European Union and the U.N. Security Council backed the OAU framework and appealed for Eritrean compliance.⁴⁸

In January 1999, Ethiopian Foreign Minister Seyoum told diplomats that the border dispute has reached "a critical turning period of the eight-month-old crisis" and urged sanctions against Eritrea for frustrating diplomatic efforts to end the dispute: "The talk about the Eritrean authorities being immune to pressure is unconvincing. What they need is to be talked to in the language they understand. They might listen, and they will listen, if there are clear indications that, among other things, their pockets would also be affected."⁴⁹

This blunt language coincided with massive troop reinforcements along the border and a new round of expulsions. In late January 1999, an investigative report by Amnesty International concluded that the Addis Ababa authorities had deported more than 52,000 Eritreans, causing "untold suffering" since the onset of the border dispute. Sounding a pessimistic note, Zenawi hinted that a resumption of fighting might be the only solution to the conflict.⁵⁰ As full-scale war appeared imminent, U.S. envoy Anthony Lake and U.N. envoy Mohammed Sahnoun stepped up diplomatic efforts to no avail.⁵¹

The uneasy eight-month truce ended February 6 when ferocious fighting broke out in the Badme area and then spread to the other contested fronts with tanks, artillery, missiles and infantry engagement. Ethiopia claimed that since there was lukewarm international pressure on Asmara to accede to the OAU framework, the only option was to use military force to recapture its territory. As part of the escalation, both sides broke the moratorium on air strikes by

attacking each other's vital targets. The U.N. Security Council, in a belated gesture, called on all states to end the sale of arms and ammunitions to the two belligerents, a move that would have little significant impact on either side. The resurgence of full-scale war produced another flurry of frantic international peace efforts to secure a cease-fire. But efforts by the EU and the OAU in mid-February 1999 failed to move either party from its position—Ethiopia insisted that the OAU framework could not be renegotiated, while Eritrea demanded clarifications and revisions.⁵² At the end of February 1999, after heavy fighting, Ethiopia pushed Eritrean forces out of the disputed Badme territory. And although, Asmara subsequently accepted the OAU peace plan, fighting continues along the disputed border regions.

THE BORDER AND BEYOND

A peaceful outcome seems elusive precisely because external intervenors predicated a settlement on technical and arcane border issues. If the conflict were genuinely one of border demarcation, external actors could readily assist, drawing on accumulated knowledge and extant legal frameworks. In such a case, external actors could prescribe, as the OAU plan has done already, bilateral or multilateral frameworks that allow the parties to save face while reducing armed conflict and restoring confidence. But border wars that are manifestations of nation-building conflicts are less amenable to outside suasion. The myriad unresolved problems of the Ethiopian-Eritrean rupture—ranging from the nature of political institutions, economic development, currencies and trade to Ethiopia's lack of direct sea access—are long-term ones that require sturdy bilateral institutions. Outsiders can prescribe, but not impose, national and regional institutions that anchor authority in wider contexts of legitimacy—institutions that might, in the late twentieth century, overcome parochial nationalisms.

Rigidly conceived, borders delineate territorial and political space, bestowing citizenship and responsibilities. Africa's fixation with this exclusive dimension of boundaries stems from fascination with state- and nation-building, goals that are part of the postcolonial enterprise. Conflicts over these goals are heightened where borders are ill defined. In new postcolonial societies, internal authority is less secure when it is not coterminous with certain geographical boundaries. Border demarcations, sovereignty and territorial integrity are some of the organizational tools used to assert such authority. On the other hand, integration eliminates frontiers as useful political and economic objects and denies the salience of sovereignty. By fostering functional cooperation across borders, economic integration creates institutions that are larger than borders. In Africa, integration often has been stymied by precarious nation-states, groping to define their internal power and legitimacy. The Ethiopia-Eritrea case shows how elite concerns for power retention and narrow nationalisms overpowered the still underdeveloped opportunities for economic integration. ■

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